DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 390 044 CS 215 130

AUTHOR	Benton, Michael
TITLE	Literature Teaching and the National Curriculum. Occasional Papers, 14.
INSTITUTION	Southampton Univ. (England). Centre for Language Education.
PUB DATE	Oct 93
NOTE	31p.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Standards; Adolescent Literature; *British National Curriculum; Childrens Literature; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Curriculum; Foreign Countries; Government Role; Guidelines; Language Arts; *Literary Criticism; *Literature Appreciation; *Reader Response; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS	Great Britain; Literary Canon

ABSTRACT

The institutional view of literature in the National Curriculum of Great Britain shows a dramatic belittlement in its revised version. It lacks a coherent literary or pedagogical rationale and substitutes a functional one in which over-simplification purports to be clarification. The institution is primarily concerned to define English literary heritage; it is more interested in control than in curriculum. For this reason, the issues of literature and learning are ignored; tests of levels of attainments are the levers of control. Opposition to Great Britain's National Curriculum could focus on three basic issues that have been the subject of advances in literary studies over the past 25 years and are either neglected or misunderstood in the National Curriculum. First, policy makers must understand that texts are no longer autonomous but are rather fluid, conditioned by the culture and personal inclinations and experience of the reader. Second, a child's reading ability is not systematic but idiosyncratic and serendipitous. Third, a prescribed canon of books is not workable. Current literary scholars regard the canon as evolutionary, subject to the shifting values being negotiated by a culture. (Contains 40 references.) (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

University
of Southampton

ED 390 044

CENTRE FOR LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

OCCASIONAL PAPERS, 14

LITERATURE TEACHING AND THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
C. J. Brumfit
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

MICHAEL BENTON

OCTOBER 1993

CS215130

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FOREWORD

Reader response criticism is the basis of the three occasional papers, Nos. 13, 14, and 15. The opening twelve pages of No. 13, Reading and Teaching Literature, give an account of reader response theory in relation to the practice of teaching. The application of response-oriented approaches in L2 classrooms are then explored in the rest of that paper. The discussion of the main theoretical ideas in No. 13 is edited and summarised, as appropriate, in the two subsequent papers. The overlap is kept to a minimum, sufficient to explicate the stance from which the arguments are mounted.

No. 14, Literature Teaching and the National Curriculum, is a contribution to an on-going debate in a highly politicised context. 'Response to Literature' is a much-used phrase in both English for Ages 5-16 (The Cox Report) (1989) and in the 'Proposals for the Revised Order' (PRO) (April 1993) and seems set to feature as a major element in National Curriculum English whatever the outcome of the current review. Yet, it is inadequately explored in Cox and seriously misunderstood in the PRO. 'Response to literature', rather like 'creative writing' a generation earlier, is an uncomfortable phrase and an easy victim: uncomfortable because it can sound as if it stems from behaviourist 'stimulus-response' thinking, which it does not; and, easily attacked because poor practice too often misconstrues the phrase to sanction neglect of the text in favour of 'any

response goes'. Thus all response-based work becomes tainted and rendered vulnerable to the charge that it lacks rigour and discipline, which, as the paper argues, it does not. As in the 1960s and 1970s, when English teachers were often Leavisites without knowing it, so in the 1980s and 1990s many literature teachers operate from a response-oriented position without necessarily being aware of doing so. The third part of this paper attempts to clarify how reader response has underpinned the thinking and practice of literature teachers in recent years.

No. 15, Reader Response Criticism in Children's Literature, is a survey of the application of reader-response ideas in the study of the novels, poems and picture books written for children. It attempts to map this under-researched area against the background of reader response concepts summarised in the first few pages in order to give future enquirers a sense of the main themes that have been developed to date and to indicate where further work might be concentrated.

No. 13 Reading and Teaching Literature was a paper delivered at The British Council's Symposium on New Approaches to the Teaching of Literature at the University of Salamanca, Spain, 20-26 September 1992.

No. 14 Literature Teaching and the National Curriculum is a draft chapter for a forthcoming book, Language Education in the National Curriculum, to be edited by Christopher Brumfit and published by Blackwells.

No. 15 Reader Response Criticism in Children's Literature is a draft chapter for The Routledge Encyclopedia of Children's Literature, to be edited by Peter Hunt and published by Routledge.

LITERATURE TEACHING AND THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The **AND** of the title links two concepts in an uncomfortable **appositional** relationship. The first part of this paper explains the source of this uneasiness through a brief account of the shift of ideas about teaching literature in recent decades. This acts, in turn, as a context for then considering the provision for literature **IN** the National Curriculum; the second part of the paper is thus concerned with the **institutional** view of literature teaching as laid down in the official documentation. The final part of the paper reads this official description **AGAINST** the developments in good practice of the last twenty-five years and offers an **oppositional**, pragmatic view of the teaching of literature in schools.

AND

The nationalisation of the literature curriculum by the Conservative government has all the characteristics one expects when politicians, of whatever colour, interfere in the details of professional matters: in particular, the assumption of consensus about the nature of the subject and how it should be taught; the desire for a socially and culturally unifying curriculum; and the need to describe the subject as existing in a stable state, including an edifice of books which everyone recognises. Literature like all the arts, thrives upon risk, upon unpredictable outcomes, sudden insights; upon "*How do I know what I think till I see what I say?*". This is as true for the child in the classroom as for the professional writer. To specify a national curriculum in literature is, to say the least, a questionable act. What and who is it for? Are we falling behind our competitors ;in the production of poets? Is there a national outcry at the feebleness of literature classes which prepare students to go on to study this consistently popular subject in higher education? The characteristics of this nationalisation are, in fact, nothing to do with good practice and everything to do with centralised control of the curriculum.

The sad facts are that they comprise a recipe for stagnation : the pressure for consensus blunts the desire to challenge, to include new texts and new ways of teaching them; the wish for a curriculum reflecting cultural unity ignores the multi-cultural diversity of our society or, at least, reduces it to mere tokenism; and the desire to define a list of contents for literature lessons is driven partly by a nostalgia for that which is familiar and partly by the expediency of that which can be centrally tested. National Curriculum literature is barely five years old - Baker's baby whose childhood was soon blighted by step-father Patten's revisionist abuse. Such has been the ostentation of recent public debate about English teaching, in which the role of literature has been central, that the steadily changing face of the literature classroom over the preceding decades has often been overlooked. This contrast between recent noisy debate and empirically researched developments in schools indicates the apposition : essentially, it is between the imposition of a literature curriculum and the evolution of professional practice. Before considering the details of literature in the National Curriculum, the context against which they are set needs to be outlined.

Forty years ago, English teaching in schools and universities was operating within a liberal humanist ideology influenced directly or indirectly by the work of F.R. Leavis. Literature teaching, in particular, was driven by two imperatives : a moral imperative that stemmed from the Arnold-Leavis belief in the civilising effect of good literature; and an artistic imperative that followed from the New Criticism idea of aesthetic totalities, that minute textual scrutiny could establish conclusively how a work of art functioned. To the pupil in secondary school, these emphases showed themselves by the stress placed upon (and given by!) comprehension and criticism, both effectively buttressed by the examination system. Literature lessons for the pre-16 year olds were dominated by comprehension exercises; for sixth formers, "practical criticism" or "critical appreciation" were phrases that implied an approach to literature

that elevated a method of detailed analysis over an individual's personal reading of a text.

Authorship both did and did not matter : it depended upon use. If the purpose was comprehension, a variety of passages from minor essayists or novelists would serve; a selection of unattributed poems, for students to assign to poets and periods could provide an academic game of "blind date" for the upper sixth as a throwback to I.A. Richards. On the other hand, authorship was important - and some authors more important than others. If the purpose was "critical appreciation" then it was necessary to know where the names stood in the literary class system so that the two parts of the exercise could be suitably counterpointed. For, essentially, the student was working to someone else's agenda of literary worth. Most 'A' level students soon discovered whose :

> *The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad - to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point in history."*
>
> *(Leavis, 1948, p.1)*

Those were the novels of the great tradition; and Revaluation (1936), with a little help from T.S. Eliot, had already given us the poets. Shelley and Tennyson were "out"; Donne and Herbert were "in". More recently, a post-Leavisite critic has done a similar job for children's literature, deliberately aping his master :

> *"The great children's novelists are Lewis Carroll, Rudyard Kipling, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Arthur Ransome, William Mayne and Philippa Pearce - to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point on an uncertain list."*
>
> *(Inglis, 1981, p.1)*

So far no-one has done the same for children's poets but no doubt Edward Lear, Eleanor Farjeon and Walter de la Mare would

be canonised. Nowadays, presumably, the champions of both adults' and children's lists would each want to claim Blake. One of the many oddities of canons (a subject to which I shall return later) is that they are heavily context-bound. While the academic literary canon might be as described above, the school literary canon might be quite other. Brian Cox has described his own from the 1930s and 1940s as including *"Kinglake's Eothen, Thomas Hughes's Tom Brown's Schooldays, Charles Kingsley's The Water Babies and the essays of Charles Lamb, all little read by the young of today."* (Cox 1991, p.69). My own from the 1940s and 1950s included Helen Bannerman's Little Black Sambo, John Buchan's Prester John, much Victorian poetry, including "Horatius" from Macaulay's Lays of Ancient Rome; masses of Sherlock Holmes' stories; and for 'O' level, Charles Reade's The Cloister and the Hearth - a tedious and inappropriate choice which remains unfinished to this day. Some are still successfully read in school forty years on; others clearly reflect out-of-date literary and social opinions that now rule them out of the classroom.

Beyond this, there are two significant features relevant to the current debate. First, that the school canon has always contained much that apologists for the academic canon would regard as second or third rate literature. Canons are always variable "constructs" according to time, place and function. Thus, to allow people other than professional English teachers (for example Ministers or their advisers) to describe the school canon stems either from stupidity or from ulterior motives. Secondly, there is the necessity of rubbish, or, at least, the young reader's need for a mixed diet including plenty of roughage as well as the plums. Setting aside the question of who decides something is rubbish, the fact is that readers use reading for different purposes and this applies to school reading as much as any other. If the teacher's aims include the wish to captivate the class with the mystery and suspense of a developing plot, or with the heroism and adventure of a story in rhyme, then Conan Doyle and Macaulay's Horatius are good material - yet few would

place these authors high in the academic canon. Where fiction is concerned, young readers need to be 'hooked' by a compelling story well told; with verse there is the enchantment of the fiction and the form in which the appeal of rhyme and rhythm are basic. On these criteria, "minor" writers are arguably more likely to capture young readers than the more sophisticated members of the academic canon.

Traditional literature teaching also placed a high premium upon formal essay writing. For those going into higher education this remains an important type of writing to master; but the problem in the past was that this was the only type of writing about literature required of pupils. Indeed, as Widdowson (1982 ed.) has argued, teaching literature to post-sixteen students was largely a matter of teaching essay-writing; and, in many schools, this emphasis started earlier. It took some years before teachers realised that there is nothing sacrosanct, or even particularly appropriate, about the essay as a mode of response to literature. It is a form descended from belles-lettres, appropriated by literary criticism, and bolstered by an examination system geared to assessing verbal chunks of timed virtuosity. In many respects it is a curiously inhibiting form of writing in which to require pupils to express their reactions to literature. It is given to detached argument rather than personal response, to evaluation rather than exploration. As such, it is a sophisticated form, suitable for those aspiring to study literature in Higher Education, but which needs to be developed from a basis of the more varied and informal writing agenda that is appropriate for all pupils.

In all these areas - criticism, reading, the canon, writing about literature - the past twenty-five years have seen the steady evolution of good practice. With Leavisite cultural elitism discredited and the explosion in modern literary theory producing at best exciting new ways of reading and at worst a new intellectual elitism, literature teachers have increasingly tended to find a sense of direction in the area of reader-

response theory and practice. This development is, as I argue in the last section of this paper, the evolutionary successor to Leavisite liberal humanism and has provided a framework of now familiar ideas which are widely accepted among literature teachers and to which other lines of critical activity often make reference : the plurality of meanings within a literary work; the creative participation of the reader; the acknowledgement that the reader is not a tabula rasa but brings idiosyncratic knowledge and personal style to the act of reading; and the awareness that interpretation is socially, historically and culturally formed. Just as the stable state of post-war literary criticism has shattered, and the reader has returned to challenge the dominance of the text, so, too, have the traditional canons been exploded. Revaluations of academic and school lists have been brought about notably by feminist critics, the development of media studies, and the increasingly multi-cultural character of literature written in English. Pupils' writing about literature has focussed more upon process, upon using writing as an aid to thinking. "Creative" responses, genre transformation, informal jotting around texts, journal writing are just some of the ways that teachers have sought to encourage pupils to explore and refine their responses to literature.

This rich agenda in the main areas of literature teaching, developed and classroom-tested by teachers for twenty-five years, has now been subjected to bureaucratic reductiveness in a revised National Curriculum that, as Joan Clanchy remarked shortly after resigning from the National Curriculum Council over the proposals for the new English order, *"has been constructed for tests, as if the Highway Code had been narrowed down to instructions on the three-point turn". (The Independent, 22. 4. 93.)*

IN

By contrast, The Cox Report (1989) had acknowledged complexity. It did so in five fundamental aspects of literature teaching : teachers' differing constructs of its status and

role; pupils' literary development; text choice and the canon; approaches to classroom teaching, and assessment. Little of the complexity of the arguments around these issues survived in the bland summaries and anodyne prose of the Attainment Targets in the Order (March 1990); and it is only occasionally hinted at in the non-statutory guidance that followed (for example, para 1.5 on the importance of individual response to literature). For this reason, the Cox Report (1989) and the author's own commentary upon it (Cox 1991) together make the most comprehensive and reliable statement of principles for National Curriculum English - one which the majority of teachers have been operating with successfully for the past three years and which I will take as the composite basic text before considering the Proposals for the Revised Order (1993).

Cox begins from a position that stresses the unitary nature of the subject and the teacher's traditional concern *"to increase children's understanding of how texts convey multiple layers of meaning and meanings expressed from different points of view" (2.16).* The status of literature and its role in school are explicitly included in three of "the famous five" views of English in the curriculum. The *"personal growth"* view emphasises *"the role of literature in developing children's imaginative and aesthetic lives (2.21);* the *"cultural heritage"* view emphasises the need *"to lead children to an appreciation of those works of literature that have been widely regarded as amongst the finest in the language" (2.24);* and the *"cultural analysis"* view emphasises *"helping children towards a critical understanding of the world and cultural environment in which they live." (2.25).* Chapter 7 on Literature explores these points, acknowledging the fun and the challenge of developing young children's *"natural enthusiasms for story structures and role-play".* It begins by affirming support for the fundamental importance of narrative both as a means of organising individual consciousness and as a form of literature (c.f. Harding 1962; Hardy 1975); and, in recognising that *"children construct the world through story",* it stresses the teacher's role in developing *"interest in the act*

of reading" (7.1). The terms in which this interest should be furthered are significant. They include : the *"development of an ear for language"* and *"knowledge of the range of possible patterns of thought and feeling made accessible by the power and range of language" (7.2);* the belief that *"literature and language are inseparably intertwined " (7.7);* and the conviction that *"learning to read and learning to write are intimately related"*, and that *"literature has an important role to play .... in improving abilities in speaking and listening and in writing, as well as in reading" (7.8). "Creative responses"* to literature are encouraged as means to understanding the craft and construction of literary texts (7.9). This whole emphasis upon the act of reading is visualised both as appropriate in itself and as the most fruitful preparation for the development of abilities in literary critical analysis with older pupils. (7.10). The significance of this description lies in the interdependency of all these elements.

Secondly, Cox stresses pupils' literary development. The hope (and presumably the aim) is expressed that pupils will *".... 'grow' through literature - both emotionally and aesthetically, both morally and socially ...." (7.3).* Literature is seen as enabling in all these spheres, and the vicarious experiences it offers are regarded as means to a better understanding of self and society. Again, the issue is complex and cross-hatches two ideas : the notion that literary progress is non-linear, uneven, sometimes regressive; and the notion of how learning through literary experiences relates to maturation and behaviour in the real world. The purpose of the Report is to make teachers aware of the issues and give guidance from a principled standpoint. Rather than expounding these notions <u>per se</u>, the Report settles for a pragmatic statement about the need for pupils *"to make progress as readers and to master increasingly demanding written material" (7.17).* The account of the likely sources of textual difficulty (7.17) shows a subtle understanding of the ways that subject matter, structure, language and length interrelate in the practice of working on poems and stories with children of

different ages.

Thirdly, on the question of text choice and the canon, Cox eschews lists of books in favour of guidelines to inform teachers' own judgements , and stresses two main points : the need to draw upon the vast range of literature in English, both current and from past centuries (7.4 and 7.5); and the importance of trusting the teachers' professional knowledge and judgement in the selection of texts for their classes (7.14). *"Formulations of 'literary tradition', 'our literary heritage' or lists of 'great works', however influential their proponents, may change radically during the course of time" (7.14).* Prescription would, therefore, not only be perverse but also an unjustifiable restriction upon professional freedom. The only exception is Shakespeare, whose plays are *"so rich that in every age they can produce fresh meanings and even those who deny his universality agree on his cultural importance" (7.16).* It was in this area that, with the benefit of hindsight, Cox accepted the criticism that his Report had taken for granted major assumptions about the value of great literature in the curriculum (Cox 1991, p.70). This led him to expand on three central issues : the desire for an English national tradition; the Leavisite belief that the study of literature promotes moral sensitivity; and the criticism that *"great literature"* enjoys a privileged and unacceptable status (Cox 1991, pp.70-78). Essentially, his responses are, respectively, that schools should now be teaching literature in English, not English Literature, to reflect the internationalism that characterises the language and the literature in both contemporary and historical respects. Secondly, quoting Kermode in support, he agrees that literary study makes better readers, not better people; nevertheless, better readers are better equipped to be questioning individuals. Thirdly, without engaging with the nature of the canon as Kermode (1990,pp.13-18) has done, Cox counters the issue of privilege by arguing for as wide a range of texts as possible. While his post-structuralist critics would scarcely be persuaded by his arguments (any more than they are by Kermode's), Cox's emphases

upon the **range** of texts and the **responsibilities** of teachers are the points, among others, that united the majority of literature teachers behind his Report.

Fourthly, on the issue of approaches to literature, Cox stresses two key words : *"active"* and *response"*. Approaches which actively engage pupils working on texts are far more likely to lead to enjoyment and understanding than those relying upon the passive acceptance of the teacher's knowledge and views. This, in turn, implies that the individual response to literature is fundamental. The Report quotes my words to support this stance:

> *"As Michael Benton puts it:*
> *'The development of a methodology that is based upon informed concepts of **reading** and **response** rather than upon conventional, narrowly-conceived ideas of **comprehension** and **criticism** is now the priority'" (7.22).*

While there is little discussion of the notion of literary response in the Report (something that the final section of this chapter attempts to give), there is a clear indication in the *"Appendix : Approaches to the Class Novel"* that the practical implications have been accepted.

Finally, Cox indicates that the already complex issue of assessment was made impossible by the TGAT requirement to fall in line with a criterion-referenced set of levels of attainment. Four years on, the naivete of Cox's statement that his working group took to heart TGAT's comment that *"The assessment process itself should not determine what is to be taught and learned. It should be the servant, not the master, of the curriculum" (14.3)*is a measure of how far matters have deteriorated. Cox acknowledges the recursive nature of language learning and the inappropriateness of a linear sequence of attainment descriptions to monitor development. (14.5 and 14.6). This is especially so where literary progress is concerned. Hence, in AT2 Reading, Cox

is driven to repeat the same description at levels 8, 9 and 10 in strand (i), on the range of literature (16.19 and 16.20); and to do all but the same in strand (ii) on response where development hinges on fine distinctions between *"perceptive"* (level 9) and *"sophisticated"* (level 10). Cox makes a brave effort at compromise but the exercise of fitting a reader's literary progress neatly into ten levels is absurd and one suspects Cox knows it. This is not to say that development cannot be monitored, but a much broader brush is needed both to describe the phases and to paint a fuller picture of the evidence on a more inclusive basis. The analogy with Art is helpful, as I argue presently.

In this, as in the other areas I have outlined, there is the sense of complex issues having been debated, advice heeded, and careful judgements explained. How do the Proposals for the Revised Order (PRO) (April 1993) compare?

The remit of the review includes the perceived need to *"be more explicit about how pupils could develop the habit of reading widely, and be introduced to great literature"*. The result of the review is a disagreement between the English and the Welsh Councils over one of the main issues that Cox had discussed : prescribed texts. Specifically, the Welsh Council stays close to the spirit of the Cox Report and recommends *"that the requirements in the programmes of study for KS3 and 4 covering the range of literature that pupils should read should be less prescriptive"* (p.iii). Undeterred, the NCC proposes to keep a tight corset on English Literature and its promotion. It labels AT2 clumsily as *"Reading (including Literature)"* and, far from discussing the rationale for its judgements, simply asserts what it takes to be self-evident truths.

The regression to Leavisite principles in the PRO is obvious in its ideas and vocabulary. Not satisfied with the inclusion of lists of *"required reading"*, the Secretary of State is to ask the Councils *"whether the programme of study for the reading of fiction in for KS3 and 4 could be better designed to ensure a*

study of the great tradition of the novel ...." (p.v, para 18). Back to set books, to prescribed lists of approved texts, and to the arrogant assumption that NCC can *"out-Leavis"* Leavis and *"define the criteria for good literature" (6.13).* Indeed, the frequency with which the phrases *"good quality literature", "literary heritage", "classic fiction and verse"* (or variants on these) appear indicates that the anonymous writers of PRO see as unproblematic the very areas where Cox had acknowledged complexity.

A further example of its limited horizons is the parochialism with which PRO describes the canon. After acknowledging the difficulties of defining it, the main problem turns out to be as follows :

> *.... it will be important to consider the nature of the balance which needs to be struck between the reading of, on the one hand, English and, on the other, commonwealth and world literature....."*
>
> *(2.1)*

Such was the remit; and the result? Under AT2 we are told that Council has sought to ensure that pupils

> *"are introduced to those writers and texts which are of central importance to our literary heritage whilst also introducing pupils to other traditions and cultures." (6.6).*

"Our" and *"other"*; "us" and "them". In an embarrassingly inept attempt to justify this division, Council states that it distinguishes *"between reading literature produced in the British Isles and Commonwealth and world literature" (6.15).* So, it's the production site that matters, not the book, let alone its author. There's an obvious temptation to lampoon this fatuousness (I think of Salman Rushdie, say, drafting a story in Bombay, tinkering with it as he flies over the Middle East and

Europe, and preparing the text for simultaneous publication in Britain and America) - but, I must resist, for the jibes are easy, yet NCC's statements are soon to be ratified in law.

This crass attempt at an unsustainable distinction between *"our"* and *"other"* is irrelevant to the practice of literature teaching : it is one of the more blatant examples of the desire to use literature to express notions of a national heritage when, in fact, *"writing has always consisted of a mosaic of international traditions and forms"* (Letter to The Guardian, 19. 5. 93.).

The above quotation is from a letter signed by 18 authors whose names or works have been put on the lists in the PRO and who wish to dissociate themselves from this exercise. Their objections range widely but they identify some specific deficiencies of the lists which can be summarised as follows :

(i) the lists are authoritarian in that they come without either debate or commentary;

(ii) they have a negative effect upon teachers' understanding of and enthusiasm for literature through delimiting and dictating choice;

(iii) they are unrepresentative of many cultural traditions that have prevailed in the past and are important today; and, as they trenchantly state :

(iv) *"If we are 'approved' authors, then by implication other writers are 'not approved'. We do not wish to be part of such a blanket, uncritical rejection of fellow writers".*

The new proposals attempt to fudge such issues by making two disingenuous points in their four brief paragraphs explaining the Council's views on *"Understanding and Appreciating Literature"*. First, they claim to make *"a careful distinction .... between the*

reading of novels, poems and plays and the study of them" (6.12). Secondly, they claim to have *"struck a pragmatic balance between prescription and flexibility" (6.13).* In fact, they achieve neither.

Wide reading is invariably linked with introducing the literary heritage and Council sees *"no conflict between these two objectives" (6.12);* and the lists of books are explicitly to *"provide a clearer definition of what pupils' wide reading should look like"* (6.14). Reading is, thus, only as wide as NCC says it should be. Their understanding of the study of literature is even more seriously flawed, as is clear from the descriptions of the strands on *"Comprehension"* and *"Response to Literature"* under AT2. There is no rationale for the relationship between the two; indeed, the one is sometimes defined in terms of the other. Thus, at level 10, comprehension involves pupils' abilities to *"articulate a detailed, critical response to a complex and challenging passage from a text ...."*; and in the next column, response requires that pupils' show *"a detailed understanding of [the] themes"* of a text. Through the ten levels, comprehension is defined in respect of hidden meanings (level 6) or authorial intentions level 7), with words like 'subtle', 'complex' and 'difficult' finding particular favour, and without any sense that, in literary reading particularly, what the reader brings to the task of making meaning is at least as important as what the text says. Nor is this omission catered for in the adjacent columns, where response is defined by reference to *"the language, structure and themes"* of a text (level 9), and where there is a marked emphasis upon the final draft, considered response and no concern for the actual process of responding to literature. *"Response to literature "* is, clearly, a most convenient umbrella term for the NCC to put up : it allows them to parade examples of activities for levels 6 - 10, all of which read like examination essay questions, while sheltering under cover of a virtuous title.

The *"balance between prescription and flexibility"* is also

meant to beguile - this time with its appealing pragmatism; yet, its purpose, too, is to narrow the literature curriculum to make it easily testable. This *"balance"* is defined in weasel words :

> *"Council has chosen not to prescribe rigidly, but to require a choice of authors from a defined list." (6.13).*

What does *"require"* mean if not *"prescribe"*? This required reading is then curiously justified as a more sensible approach than *"to introduce pupils to authors' work by using extracts in anthologies"*. Does this mean that we have only just escaped a national anthology, compiled in an office in York and obligatory for all schools : Pascall's Golden Treasury? Whatever it means, the confused fumbling with *"prescribe"*, *"require"* and *"defined"* indicates not balance but a feeble attempt to disguise NCC's real intentions to dictate to English teachers which texts should be taught in schools.

The institutional view of literature in the National Curriculum shows a dramatic belittlement in its revised version. It lacks a coherent literary or pedagogic rationale and substitutes a functional one in which over-simplification purports to be clarification. The institution is primarily concerned to define an English literary heritage; it is more interested in control than in curriculum. For this reason, the issues of literature and learning are ignored; tests of levels of attainment are the levers of control.

AGAINST

My oppositional view focusses upon three basic issues that have been the subject of advances in our understanding in the past twenty-five years and are either neglected or misunderstood in the PRO :

(i) The act of reading and, in particular, what has been

learned about the process of literary response;

(ii) Reading development and its assessment;

(iii) The nature of literary canons and the associated question of value.

(i) Reader-response writings during the 1970s and 80s have increasingly forged a new relationship between the act of reading and the act of teaching literature. In the literature classroom, reader response has become the new orthodoxy. Theoretical writings of the 1970s in this area were succeeded by a rash of publications on the methodology of literature teaching (Protherough 1983; Benton and Fox 1985; Scholes 1985; Cooper 1985; Dias and Hayhoe 1988; Benton et al 1988) culminating in Britain in the high profile given to the reader's response to literature in the Cox Report (1989), which still survives in skeletal form despite Government interference in 1993. Such has been what one standard book on modern literary theory calls *"the vertiginous rise of reader-response criticism"* (Jefferson and Robey, 1986, 2nd edn. p. 142), that its authors see it as threatening to engulf all other approaches. What the PRO fail to understand is that reader-response theory and practice operate form a philosophical basis that displaces the notion of an autonomous text to be examined in and on its own terms from the centre of critical discussion and substitutes the reader's re-creation of that text. (The clearest exposition of this phenomenon that I know are the opening two pages of Freund's <u>The Return of the Reader</u> (1987)). Reading is not the discovering of meaning, like some sort of archaelogical 'dig', but the creation of it. The central concerns of response-oriented approaches focus upon (i) what constitutes the source of literary meaning; and (ii) what is the nature of the interpretative process that creates it. Both issues are fundamental to classroom action.

Iser's theory of aesthetic response (1978) and Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work (1978; 1985) have been seminal in changing the culture of the classroom to one which, as John Lucas notes in the TLS, November 1987, operates on the principle that the text cannot be said to have a meaningful existence outside the relationship between itself and its reader(s). This transfer of power represents a sea-change in critical emphasis and in pedagogical practice from the assumptions most critics and teachers held even a generation ago. Yet it is evolutionary change, not sudden revolution - a progressive re-thinking of the way readers create literary experiences for themselves with poems and stories and which is concerned to honour both the integrity of the text and of the reader. The concern with pedagogy, most clearly seen in Rosenblatt's work, goes back to Richards but without the debilitating effect that his notorious "ten difficulties" produced in the literature teaching that derived from Practical Criticism (1929). In Rosenblatt's transactional theory the relationship between the nature of reading and the teaching of literature is central and her portrait of the reader has an altogether more human face than others to be found in modern criticism (Rosenblatt, 1970, pp.30-31). Each 'reading' is to be understood in the context of the whole literary and life experience of an individual. A reader's personality, needs, interests and so on are significant mediators in any response. This fuller role preserves the participatory reader from being merely an intellectual cipher that is implied, for example, by Wayne Booth, without consigning the reader to the analyst's couch as a transformational theorist like Holland is tempted to do; and it derives directly from Rosenblatt's belief that literature stands in a unique relationship with knowledge. Literature does not provide information as much as experience. *"Literature provides a living-through, not simply knowledge about"* (Rosenblatt, 1970, p.38).

Learning through literature is different from other learning experiences because of its grounding in an aesthetic process. There are plentiful examples in modern literary theory and in reading theory of approaches and techniques which reduce the reading process to a ready-made system of analysis, or give what Richard Rorty has called *"methodical readings"* (Eco, 1992, pp.106-107). These are ones which, far from offering a sense of fresh encounter of new vital experience, settle instead for the utilitarian opportunity to use a text as a specimen reiterating a type, or an example on which to exercise particular skills or techniques. Sadly, there are many instances, too, where classroom method reduces what should be the experience of literature to the arid inquisition of just another sort of textbook. In theory and practice, in literary and educational studies, there is the constant danger of dealing with aesthetic experiences in reductive ways. As Rosenblatt (1985, p.39) says: *".... keeping the aesthetic transaction central (has) important implications for questions raised and methods used in both teaching and research."*

Reader-response in the past two decades has sought to avoid this reductiveness through the use of exploratory talk and informal writing to help pupils monitor, record and share their thinking with that of others. Such activities follow from a theoretical position which can live comfortably with the idea of resisting closure, with meanings not fixed, with the infinitely renewable quality of literary experience. By starting where the readers are and thus avoiding the twin tendencies to <u>explication du text</u> and to premature value judgements - the Scylla and Charybdis of classroom methods between which many a poem and story has been crushed - response-oriented approaches claim to hold the reader's initial engagement with a text and develop it in ways that are both valid and valued by

pupils as interpretive acts. It is highly unlikely that the next generation of pupils will see either the validity or the value of their work in literature in these terms, given the PRO's functional, exam-style examples of classroom activities mentioned earlier and the banalities of the SATs.

In an article in the **TES** earlier this year, Sue Hackman makes the pedagogical point succinctly :

> *"Consider reading. In the tests, reading is presented as a comprehension exercise of the most literal kind. The pupil is confined to "fill-in-the-gaps" type of answers. This is because the ideology which underpins the tests sees textual meanings as fixed, and demands conformity of interpretation. In this model, a good teacher is able to put pupils in touch with accepted readings.*
>
> *English teachers are committed to another view of reading, in which meanings are more volatile and diverse, each reading formed by the interaction of reader, text and cultural context, and modified when it is shared and challenged among the wider reading community. Critical interpretation is encouraged, and pupils are asked to account for their views by close reference to the text. In this model, the teacher is helping the pupil towards independent literacy.*
>
> *Despite some overlaps, the pedagogies are quite different. Teachers who now see themselves as guiding and intervening in individual development are being required to convert to a transmission style of teaching, seeing themselves much more as custodians of, and inductors into, established knowledge.*
>
> *(**TES**. 5. 3. 93)*

(ii) Development in reading is a notoriously tricky area which has been approached from various directions : attempts to match the child's literary capabilities and interests with his or her psychological development (Applebee 1978; Tucker 1981); studies of children as readers, where individual and age group needs dictate appropriate books (Fisher 1964; Meek 1982); deductions drawn from surveys of children's reading habits (Whitehead et al, 1977); and even personal reminiscences of bookish childhoods (Sampson 1947; Inglis 1981). In their different ways, all these approaches indicate that, while there are noticeable phases in reading development - and even crucial stages around the age of seven and at the beginning of the teens - there are also many variables. The amount and type of reading a child does is likely to be uneven, to reflect gender preferences, and to be subject to many cultural, personal and peer influences. Reading behaviour, especially that of young people, owes as much to serendipity as anything else. Any literature policy that imposes artificial limits on choice, that predicts or prejudges children's preferences, that conceptualises development by numbers, is at odds with the evidence. As I argued some years ago, it is necessary to ask how development actually operates.

> *"At any point, children have a past, present and future to their reading development. In other words, they need books they have read already - familiar favourites, easy to relate to, predictable and secure; books they are reading - a catholic selection of books appropriate for their current stage of development; and books they are growing into, ones that are mentally and emotionally stretching and which we may judge to have some elements that are beyond them. Development does not mean leaving one sort of literature behind for ever as one moves on to another. Certainly, children who become habitual readers do experience the feeling of growing out of childish*

things that no longer satisfy ("growing out" of the series books, for example, is common in early adolescence); but, generally, development operates in a less clearly defined manner than this. For children, like their parents and teachers, use books for various purposes and to satisfy diverse needs. Depending upon a host of variables in a child's life at any one moment, he or she may turn to books that are known to be undemanding because they are familiar, exciting because they are new and unknown, or challenging because they are known to be rather "old" or "difficult" for someone of his or her age. When this stage has been reached, children have begun to see themselves as readers. When a thirteen year old is reading in rapid succession - or even concurrently - a Famous Five story, a new book by Jan Mark, and a novel by Hardy after seeing it on TV, then the past, present and future are in a reassuring and often amusing relationship.

If the growth of literary competence and satisfaction are most likely to be nourished by wide and catholic reading and by respecting the individuality of each child's development, it nevertheless remains true that literature teachers have a special responsibility for widening and deepening children's knowledge and experience of stories and poems."

Benton and Fox, 1985, pp.34-35).

To fix the template of a ten-level development and assessment scale upon this growth is profoundly irresponsible. The weight of professional evidence - particularly at GCSE - is that assessment is most valuable to pupils' progress when it is carefully integrated into their day-to-day work. A substantial element of externally-moderated coursework assessment has enabled teachers to plan for individual needs and pupils to show what they know, understand and can do. Forms of assessment

which reflect literature as one of the arts are essential. Coursework folders, akin to an Art portfolio, go some way to meeting this need in providing for varied types of writing, creative responses, the pursuit of individual enthusiasms for particular books or themes and so on. It is little wonder that what has angered English teachers most in recent times has been the undermining of GCSE course work and its intended substitution by the requirement to enter pupils for separate levels of a hierarchical examination, involving different types of text, paper or question. Together with the SATs and the requirement to study an Anthology that no publisher would choose to print nor any informed teacher choose to teach, the reading development of the next generation of pupils is likely to be seriously eroded.

(iii)The KS3 Anthology reflects neither the academic canon nor the school canon; it reflects a bureaucratic compromise canon calculated to appease particular interests and, therefore, satisfies no-one. Extracts from the 'classics', popular classroom literature, some writing by Caribbean authors, even four women out of 27 writers : the inclusions emphasise the exclusions; the choices draw attention not so much to the implied values but to the sense of expediency. Yet the question of value is clearly central to the NCC's argument for PRO. The Councils's ignorance of reader response theory and practice has, in fact, denied it the opportunity to present the issue of the canon in a coherent way which, while any definition is unlikely to meet the objections of those who regard the very notion as cultural oppression, does nonetheless follow from the view of literary reading that I have advocated above.

For, by asserting the importance of the individual's "reading" of a text, response-oriented approaches are in tune with contemporary thinking which has preferred to

define value in transitive terms (texts have value for given people in particular contexts) rather than to locate value as an inherent quality of the text itself.

One way of translating such a definition into practice is to see the classroom as a micro-version of Fish's (1980) interpretive community where the value students find in literary works is an attribute discovered over time through the exercise of common interpretive strategies rather than a judgement on one or other occasion. Valuing literature is a process of coming to know, of growing personal ownership.

This view of literary value has implications for the concept of the canon. Over time, the aggregate of readings by particular people in particular contexts grows into a collection of what a society deems to be highly valued texts.

In this way our work with pupils plays its part in the "historical evolution of art" which, as Kundera (1988, p.152), one of those "other" novelists, reminds us is not a mere succession of events but an essential pursuit of values. He remarks :

> *"If we reject the question of value and settle for a description (thematic, sociological, formalist) of a work (of a historical period, culture, etc.); if we equate all cultures and all cultural activities (Bach and rock, comic strips and Proust); if the criticism of art (meditation on value) can no longer find room for expression, then the 'historical evolution of art' will lose its meaning, will crumble, will turn into a vast and absurd storehouse of works".*

The relationship between response and responsibility (to self and text) is reader-response criticism's counter to

such a Dunciadical vision. Instead it offers an alternative picture of a constantly revalued anthology of texts which renews itself both by the inclusion of new works from diverse sources and by the reappraisal of older, existing works. This prospect of a continuously revisable canon goes some way towards meeting the well-known arguments levelled at the traditional canon that it is male-dominated, culturally unrepresentative, resistant to change, and both exclusive and narrow in its definition of what constitutes a "text". The shift from the "heritage model" to this "evolutionary model" is scarcely a dramatic one for NCC to make and excludes only those who see literature as a collection of classic texts like national monuments, stamped with preservation orders, there to be revered with uncritical praise.

Pragmatically, though, the teacher still has to select: the books on the syllabus, from whatever source they derive, are never a matter of indifference. Choices have to be made in schools and choices are a declaration of values just as much for the individual teacher as for the NCC. So, when faced with the pupil's not infrequent question : "Why do we have to read this book?", the honest answer (assuming freedom from prescribed lists) is : "Because I judged you'd like it and because it forms one part of the reading programme I envisage for you and the class this year." The values are enjoyment and progress in literary studies. But these depend upon trusting the professional knowledge and judgements of teachers - two things the NCC consistently fails to do, which is why I urge an oppositional view of literature teaching against the current provisions laid down for National Curriculum English.

REFERENCES

APPLEBEE, A.N.(1978). The Child's Concept of Story: Ages Two to Seventeen, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.

BENTON, M. and FOX, G. (1985). Teaching Literature 9-14, Oxford: O.U.P.

BENTON, M. et al.(1988).Young Readers Responding to Poems, London: Routledge.

COOPER, C.R.(ed.)(1985).Researching Response to Literature and the Teaching of Literature, Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.

COX, C.B. (1991). Cox on Cox. An English Curriculum for the 1990s, London: Hodder and Stoughton.

DIAS, P. and HAYHOE, M. (1988). Developing Response to Poetry, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

FISH, S. (1980). Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

FISHER, M. (1964). Intent Upon Reading, Leicester: Brockhampton Press.

FREUND, E. (1987). The Return of the Reader, London: Methuen.

HACKMAN, S.(1993). The Times Educational Supplement, 5th. March, 1993.

HARDING, D.W. (1962). 'Psychological Processes in the Reading of Fiction' in The British Journal of Aesthetics, 2 (2).

HARDY, B. (1975). Tellers and Listeners. The Narrative Imagination, London: Athlone Press.

INGLIS,F. (1981). The Promise of Happiness, Cambridge: C.U.P.

ISER, W.(1978). The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

JEFFERSON, A. and ROBEY, D.(1986, 2nd. edn.). Modern Literary Theory, London: Batsford.

KERMODE,F. (1990). An Appetite for Poetry, London: Fontana.

KUNDERA, M. (1988). The Art of the Novel, London: Faber.

LEAVIS, F.R. (1936). Revaluation, London: Chatto and Windus.

.....(1948). The Great Tradition, London: Chatto and Windus.

LUCAS, J. (1987). The Times Literary Supplement, November, 1987.

MEEK, M. (1982). Learning to Read, London: The Bodley Head.

PROTHEROUGH, R. (1983). Developing Response to Fiction, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

RICHARDS, I.A. (1929). Practical Criticism, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

RORTY,R. (1992). 'The Pragmatist's Progress' in Eco, U. Interpretation and Overinterpretation, Cambridge: C.U.P.

ROSENBLATT, L. (1938/70). Literature as Exploration, New York: Modern Languages Association.

..... (1978). The Reader, The Text, The Poem. The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press.

..... (1985). 'The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work : Implications for Research' in Cooper, C.R. (ed.)(1985).

SAMPSON, G. (1946). 'A Boy and his Books' in Seven Essays, London: C.U.P.

SCHOLES, R. (1985). Textual Power. Literary Theory and the Teaching of English, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

TUCKER, N. (1981). The Child and the Book, Cambridge: C.U.P.

WHITEHEAD, F. et al.(1977). Children and their Books, London: Macmillan.

WIDDOWSON, P. (ed.) (1982). Re-Reading English, London: Methuen.

National Curriculum documents:

..... (1989). English for Ages 5-16, (The Cox Report), London: H.M.S.O.

..... (1990). English in the National Curriculum, No.2, London: H.M.S.O.

..... (1993). English for Ages 5-16, Proposals for the Revised Order, London: D.F.E.

CENTRE FOR LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION OCCASIONAL PAPERS are a series of simply produced papers for informal circulation. Appearance in this series does not preclude subsequent publication, either in CLE WORKING PAPERS or elsewhere. Authors will welcome comments and responses from any readers.

OCCASIONAL PAPERS so far published:

1 *An Introduction to Research in Language in Education*
Christopher Brumfit & Rosamond Mitchell July 1990

2 *Developing the Reading Curriculum* - John Taylor August 1990

3 *Evaluation of First Version of the "Language, Communication and Media" Unit on the PGCE* - Kamana Tshibengabo & Christopher Brumfit November 1990

4 *Studying Media Audiences* - Andrew Hart March 1991

5 *Task-based Language Learning with Computers* - Christa McCormick July 1991

6 *"Playful - Aloof": Using Personal Construct Theory as a Measure of Interpersonal Affect in Native Speaker/ Non-native Speaker Conversation*
Simon Williams January 1992

7 *Evaluation of the Basingstoke Primary Schools Language Awareness Project: 1990-91, Final Report* - Rosamond Mitchell, Cynthia Martin, Mike Grenfell January 1992

8 *Learner Strategies in the Secondary School Classroom*
Michael Grenfell and Vee Harris May 1992

9 *Ecologia: Language Students and Their Lecturer in a New Learning Environment*
Alison Piper September 1992

10 *Languages in the University of Southampton. A Report on the Language Audit carried out by The Director of the Language Centre in 1991*
Alison Piper September 1992

11 *Models of Media Education: a study of Secondary English Teachers Teaching Media. Part 1: Overview* - Andrew Hart and Tony Benson December 1992.

12 *Models of Media Education: a study of Secondary English Teachers Teaching Media. Part 2: Profiles and Lessons* - Andrew Hart and Tony Benson April 1993.

13 *Reading and Teaching Literature* - Michael Benton January 1993

14 *Literature Teaching and The National Curriculum* - Michael Benton October 1993.

15 *Reader Response Criticism in Children's Literature* - Michael Benton October 1993.

Also available: **CLE Working Papers 1** 107 pp (1990)
CLE Working Papers 2 Reading 150 pp (1992)

Cost £5 each (inc. post & packing) from:
Mrs Rita Corbidge, School of Education, Southampton SO9 5NH